

# ‘My dad’s *love affair* with alcohol’



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*Her father was a warm, intelligent man – with a terrible addiction. Isabel Ashdown looks back at how it shaped the woman she was to become*

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Photograph BEN GOLD

at what normal behaviour is. I was fortunate enough to have a well-adjusted, loving mother to keep some balance in our home and, outwardly, we must have seemed a very ordinary, happy family. I was the middle child; my brother was two years older and my sister three years younger. We all knew how to behave in social situations; we were polite, articulate, smiley children and we were always popular with our friends’ parents.

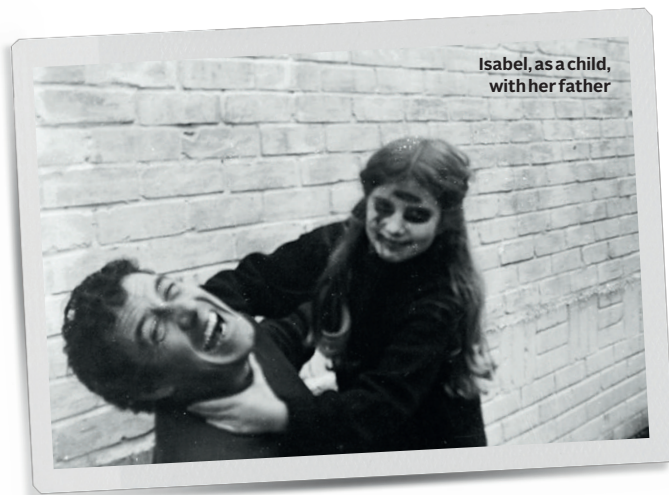
It’s only with the passing of time that I realised the way we functioned as a family was *not* normal at all. For a long time, we all knew that my father was drinking too heavily. As his alcoholism progressed, his moods grew increasingly erratic and, at times, he could be frightening and unpredictable. The whole family experienced this, individually, and as a group. But while it was going on, day in, day out, we never, ever discussed it. Perhaps we knew that if we talked about it, we’d have to confront it... and then what? Looking back, I know I *could* have spoken to my mum about anything – it’s just that I had spent so long learning how *not* to talk about difficult things that it became second nature. Today, I’m a wife and mother, and my own childhood experiences have taught me the importance of dealing with problems head on. I encourage my children to share their thoughts and fears and, thankfully, our family troubles don’t linger for long.

Another factor Woititz points out is that while ACoAs have difficulty with intimate relationships, they are also fiercely loyal. At home, there was a collective loyalty born out of the secret of my father’s drinking. He was our dad, after all. In part, I think we wanted to protect others’ opinions of him; to allow them to believe he was still the charming, >>

WHEN I WAS 21, I WALKED INTO MY LOCAL bookshop and asked the woman behind the counter if they could find a particular book for me. There was no internet shopping back then, and, as it was a specialist book, it would need to be ordered. I felt ashamed asking for it, and had to repeat the title several times before the assistant located it in her trade journal. ‘Ah, yes!’ she finally declared, loudly. ‘Here it is! *Adult Children Of Alcoholics!*’ She looked up at me, delighted, and I wanted to die on the spot.

A fortnight later, my book arrived. It was two years since my father had died of alcohol-related disease, aged 50, and I was only now starting to come to terms with the fact that his alcoholism had affected me so deeply. He’d always been a heavy drinker, and it was something the family took for granted, without much question. But in his final years of life, his descent into alcoholism, illness and early death was rapid and brutal. The book eloquently put into words the multi-layered feelings I had, until then, thought were exclusive to me – I read it in one sitting, crying silent tears of recognition.

What author Janet Woititz suggests in *Adult Children Of Alcoholics* (ACoAs), is that ACoAs guess



Isabel, as a child,  
with her father

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witty man they thought they knew. It wasn't something we sat down and discussed; just a silent agreement that suited us all. As a result, I grew up with strong expectations of loyalty from others, which, at times, only led to disappointment. At my all-girl secondary school, I was uncomfortable with the cliquey, popular set, so I stayed close to my best friend, Jacks, who I'd known since I was nine. I felt ill-equipped to embark on those carefree, arms-linked friendships that so many of the other girls enjoyed. To me, they seemed flimsy, transient. These girls would steal each other's boyfriends one week and forgive each other the next. I couldn't fathom them out at all. And so I remained comfortably just outside of the inner circle.

TODAY, AT THE AGE OF 40, I HAVE MANY wonderful friends who I value deeply. I follow a simple code when it comes to friendships: if someone makes you feel good, makes you laugh, brings you joy, they're a true friend. But if they make you feel bad, if they add nothing but stress and upset to your life, you should let them go. One of the great things about being an adult is you get to choose who to spend time with. Several of my friends are old mates I've known for 20 or 30 years, others I've met more recently through work, or via the children. Life shifts and changes, but they're all friends I know I could turn to in any situation.

Soon after I turned 17, everything changed. In his late forties, unable to continue in his job as a senior lecturer at the local college, my father was given early retirement. For nearly 20 years, he'd worked in an environment where drinking at lunchtime was the norm and, in many ways, actively encouraged. But now he found himself, not yet 50 and pensioned off *because* of the drink. At 20, my brother had already moved out, and was working on a kibbutz in Israel. Over the next few months, my mother, sister and I navigated our way through each day in a haze of exhausted anxiety, as my father's nocturnal drinking disrupted the family around the clock. Finally, one sunny Sunday afternoon, after trying and failing to get him to agree to treatment for his alcoholism, Mum

realised we'd reached our limit. We left, moving on to a friend's empty houseboat, until we were able to sort out more stable living arrangements.

INITIALLY, WE CUT OFF CONTACT WITH MY father, but by the time we moved into our rented home, a guilty sense of responsibility persuaded me to contact him. Despite our by now fractured relationship, I began to visit him regularly, witnessing the dramatic decline in his health and appearance. It was like watching a horror film, where you don't want to look, but somehow you're compelled to. Waitz describes this as the 'super-responsible' trait of the child, created by the desire to be perfect. It's something I see at work in my adult life, and while it may often bear fruit, it is ultimately an impossible and arduous goal. At school, during the turbulent years, my studying dropped off altogether and I left at 15 with just three C-grade O levels. However, once I got into the workplace, I found I was driven and enthusiastic, so that by my early thirties, I was a well-paid senior manager for an international company. When I gave up my career to go to university, I graduated with a first-class degree and a Masters in Creative Writing, and by 2009 my debut novel, *Glasshopper*, was twice named as one of the best books of the year. So, I've known success, which is arguably as a result of this 'super-responsible' drive.

However, that persistent struggle for perfection comes at a cost. Now that I'm a self-employed writer, I work longer hours than ever before, rarely switching off the computer before 10pm. I find it hard to relax, and my long-suffering husband, Colin, is always telling me I should slow down and take a break. Of course, this annoys me immeasurably, because I know he's absolutely right.

My father died less than two years after we left, and there's no doubt that his alcoholism left a mark on us all. However, thanks to my mother, I'm an incurable optimist. She's now married to my stepfather, David, who, like her, is a talented artist, much-loved grandparent to our children and good friend to us all. These days, I share my life with Colin and our two beautiful children, Alice and Samson, of whom I am immensely proud. I'm still close to my brother and sister and, when time allows, we enjoy family get-togethers where all the cousins can run wild and we can catch up. I'm grateful that I can now look back on my memories of Dad and know that, despite his considerable flaws, he did have good qualities. In his best years, he was warm, intelligent and loving. But he was also a man with a terrible addiction, and a man who made some bad choices in life. As hard as it was to watch his decline, in its own way, Dad's story taught me one of the most important lessons of all: life really is what you make of it. ■

*Hurry Up And Wait* by Isabel Ashdown  
(Myriad Editions, £8.99) is out now